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ABSTRACT

A project investigated the extent to which the current adult basic education (ABE) provision was meeting the needs of participants in Northern Ireland. Interviews were conducted with key individuals from 22 agencies providing adult literacy and numeracy support, selected tutors and managers of ABE (n=62), and 55 ABE students. Students had a variety of reasons for participation, often both vocational and personal. Barriers were mainly dispositional, including the fear of being seen to have ABE needs, of traveling to unsafe areas, and of not being able to cope with course content. Situational barriers included the costs incurred by participation. Child care considerations also affected students' participation and regular attendance. Students gave particular praise to course content, styles of teaching, and teachers' qualities. In contrast to initial assessment and induction guidance, pre-entry guidance was minimal. Participants considered guidance and support while on courses to be excellent. The majority of coordinators and managers of ABE provision felt that, overall, available funding for ABE in Northern Ireland was insufficient. Full-time staff were the best qualified, but most ABE teaching was done by part-time and volunteer tutors with lower levels of relevant qualifications. Benefits included helping improve skills needed at work and increasing promotion prospects, improving the quality of life, and increasing self-esteem. Contains eight references. (YLB)

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Adult Literacy and Numeracy

Meeting the Needs of Participants

Kevin Lowden
Janet Powney
John Gardner
Robin Mark

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Adult Literacy and Numeracy

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Kevin Lowden
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SCRE
The Scottish Council for Research in Education

SCRE Research Report No 70

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GLOSSARY

ABE	Adult Basic Education
ALBEC	Adult Literacy and Basic Education Committee
BTEC	Business and Technician Education Council
DED	Department of Economic Development
DENI	The Department of Education for Northern Ireland
DHSS	Department of Health and Social Services
EGSA	Educational Guidance Service for Adults
ELB	Education and Library Boards
FE	Further Education
JTP	Job Training Programme
NICAE	Northern Ireland Council for Adult Education
RSA	Royal Society of Arts
RTO	Recognised Training Organisation
SCRE	Scottish Council for Research in Education
T&EA	Training and Employment Agency
WEA	Workers' Educational Association

Executive Summary

Many adults in Northern Ireland take advantage of the opportunities, provided by a variety of agencies, to improve their numeracy and literacy skills. Considerable resources are expended on adult education services which cater for a wide range of learners and a research project was commissioned by the Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DENI) in order to gain further evidence of the extent to which these services met participants' needs. The one year research study was undertaken in 1993-1994 by the Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE) with consultative advice from colleagues at Queen's University, Belfast.

Aims and methods for the project

The broad aim of the project was to investigate the extent to which the current adult basic education (ABE) provision is meeting the needs of participants. The other main objectives were to:

- identify the kinds of students who currently participate in learning opportunities relating to literacy and numeracy;
- examine the barriers to the uptake of opportunities;
- consider the adequacy of funding and other resources;
- consider the adequacy of staffing for courses.

As the main concerns of the study were the factors likely to encourage and enhance (or inhibit) adults' basic education experience, it was therefore essential to collect the views of the participants, the learners and the providers. An analysis of these views was designed to complement the comprehensive data on participation, staff numbers and costs of adult basic education (ABE) courses, kept by (DENI) and the Training and Employment Agency (T&EA). Interviews were conducted with

- key individuals from 22 agencies providing adult literacy and numeracy support. These discussions generated the relevant and appropriate points to be taken up in interviews with other informants.
- selected tutors and managers of ABE in the public, commercial and voluntary sectors. These telephone interviews were based on a structured questionnaire designed to elicit information about: the nature and scope of their provision; the adults who attended their courses; possible barriers to their courses and their views on staffing and resourcing.
- groups of ABE students from a sample of FE colleges, Training Link courses and the WEA. The group interviews garnered students' views on the adequacy of provision, barriers to take-up and how the provision might be improved.

It was possible to identify both areas of agreement and divergence from these three kinds of perspective which are unlikely to surprise experts and practitioners in the field but which will inform those new to the issues and assist policy-makers in their planning. This research did not set out to solve the problems relating to the scale and scope of non-participation but does identify the types of barriers facing those with ABE needs.

The context of adult basic education in Northern Ireland

There are significant numbers of adults in Northern Ireland who have major difficulties with reading, writing and basic numeracy. *The Education Service in Northern Ireland: A Strategic Analysis* (DENI 1994) highlights the fact that high percentages of those working (30%) and unemployed (40%) have no qualifications. Furthermore, although the percentage of school leavers who leave with no formal qualifications of any kind has declined significantly over the last five years, there are still 17% of school leavers with GCSE grades D-G (or 'O' level or CSE equivalents). There remain a large number of adults estimated as 4,000- 4,500 in Northern Ireland with basic education needs which are served by a diversity of providers.

The many agencies involved in basic education for adults can be broadly grouped under provision: in further education colleges, by the Training and Employment Agency, by the WEA and (mainly for people with additional special needs) by the Department of Health and Social Services. These providers together with other support agencies for ABE have a forum for their common interests in The Adult Literacy and Basic Education Committee (ALBEC). This sub-committee of the Northern Ireland Council for Adult Education (NICAE) promotes, encourages and reviews all aspects of basic education for adults including literacy and numeracy; maintains links with other bodies with similar interests; and promotes high standards in the delivery of basic education.

Findings

Adult participants in ABE - their characteristics and motivation

- Providers estimate that the most common types of participants are unemployed men. Fewer women than men seem to take courses but this is not consistent across all age groups and courses.

- Students did not use the same hard distinction often made by policy makers and others, in relating participation in courses to either vocational or personal/leisure motivation. They had a variety of reasons for their participation, often both vocational and personal in orientation.

- Some students highlighted the process by which participation and success in broad-based basic skills courses encouraged them to progress on to more demanding courses which were often more vocational in orientation. Adults doing the Recognised Training Organisation courses were the most vocationally oriented.

- In areas where unemployment was especially high, the students were sceptical about the usefulness of expressly vocational courses.

The initial stimulus to participate in ABE was often 'triggered' when some event or realisation in the person's work or personal life brought into focus their lack of basic skills and the need to acquire better literacy or numeracy skills.

- The most common motives for seeking opportunities to enhance their skills were to get help with problems of everyday life and to build up self-confidence and esteem. These two motives are clearly related to each other as well as associated with the close and unpredictable relationships between vocational and non-vocational courses. The latter often provide the necessary boost in confidence for adults to allow them to continue to more advanced courses at the same time as enhancing their employment prospects.

- The rôle of supportive friends and family was clear as they would often find out what courses were available and then encourage partners or family members with ABE needs to participate. This suggests that advertising aimed at potential ABE could review how best to reach, not just the adults themselves, but also their friends and family who could then encourage their participation.

Barriers to participating in ABE

Barriers from within the individual which had hampered adults in getting on their current course or had put them off previous courses included the fear of being seen to have ABE needs, of travelling to unsafe areas and of not being able to cope with course content. Barriers arising from circumstances included the cost incurred by participation - mainly travel but also fees. Outreach provision was particularly valued in rural areas and by those who preferred not to travel into certain localities. Childcare considerations were also reported as affecting the students' participation and the extent to which they could attend regularly.

Funding

- Facilities and accommodation available to the classes were of high quality in the RTO sites and were somewhat stretched in the FE college courses.

- The majority of co-ordinators and managers of ABE provision felt that overall there was insufficient funding available for ABE in Northern Ireland.

- There remains uncertainty about whether new models of funding FE students will enhance the ABE share of college budgets.

- Providers see improvements in materials, accommodation and in the number and training of staff as priorities if further funding were available but given the reportedly low uptake of courses by women with young children, better crèche facilities could be seen as important. Providers gave lower priority to guidance, monitoring, and outreach provision.

Staffing

- The students gave particular praise to the content of their courses, styles of teaching and particularly the qualities of their teachers. A good tutor was patient, a good listener, treated students as adults, was easy to get on with, understood the pressures on students and respected students' different abilities and needs.

- The numbers of full time staff varied and providers would have liked a ratio of one tutor to five adult learners. However in practice the range was most likely to be one tutor for between six and thirteen adult learners. Lower ratios would be used, if possible, with adults with special needs.

- Some interesting information emerged in relation to staff qualifications. Full-time staff are the best qualified but most ABE teaching is done by part-time and voluntary tutors whose level of relevant qualifications is comparatively low compared with full time staff.

- There was a widely held view that all staff should receive training but there was also some concern at the high turnover rate of voluntary tutors who become qualified and then apparently move out of ABE teaching.

The extent to which current provision is meeting needs

- This project only deals with the needs of those adults already participating in ABE rather than all adults who have literacy and numeracy needs. The DENI statistics suggest that it will be more common for adults to require support in post basic numeracy and literacy. However, national ABE provision statistics and the findings from this project indicate that the majority of provision is still geared to basic/foundation levels of literacy and numeracy.

- Initial assessment of individual students' needs was common practice and thorough in nature. However, systematic action plans providing guidance on how to progress after completing their course were almost non existent. In contrast to initial assessment and induction guidance, pre-entry guidance was minimal across providers with variable information and advice being given when the students contacted providers. Most staff felt they needed more specialised guidance training. Nevertheless participants considered the guidance and support experienced while on courses were excellent.

- Finally, the value of ABE courses for adults who do participate was made clear by the accounts of the informants. The benefits included: helping improve skills needed at work and increasing their promotion prospects, improving the quality of life by, for example, enabling reading for pleasure. By far the greatest benefit seemed to be an increase in self-esteem.

1 Aims of the project

The Adult Literacy and Numeracy in Northern Ireland research project was commissioned by the Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DENI) in 1993. It was a one year project running from September 1993 to August 1994. The research was undertaken by the Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE) with consultative advice from colleagues at Queen's University, Belfast.

The broad aim of the project was to investigate the extent to which the current adult basic education (ABE) provision is meeting the needs of participants. The other main objectives were:

- to identify the types of student who currently participate in learning opportunities relating to literacy and numeracy;
- to examine the barriers to the uptake of opportunities;
- to consider the adequacy of funding, staffing for courses and other resources.

The audience for the report is primarily the sponsors, DENI, but it is hoped that the illumination of the issues will also be of benefit to all concerned with, or potentially concerned with, adult basic education. Experts and practitioners in the field are unlikely to be surprised by the findings while those new to the issues and those with policy-making responsibility should find the work helpful in assisting them with their planning.

One of the major issues in ABE planning is the problem of identifying the numbers of adults with ABE needs. This is a difficult and somewhat intractable matter as those who require ABE are by virtue of their needs difficult to trace and bring onto courses. This research did not set out to solve the problems relating to the scale and scope of non-participation but in the course of the work clear indicators of the types of barriers preventing those with ABE needs seeking help, are identified.

The Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DENI) and the Training and Employment Agency (T&EA) both keep comprehensive data on ABE courses, participation, staff numbers and costings and the intention of this research is to look beyond these numbers and seek views on the current provision from the perspective of the various participants. The central methodology was therefore inquiry by interview; seeking the views of the ABE organisers, tutors and students on the main issues addressed in the objectives. If, for any particular issue, there is a consensus of opinion *within* and *across* the groups it is reasonable to consider that the sentiments expressed and the information provided have validity in so much as they have been agreed, or in technical terms have been 'triangulated', through comparison of the responses made by the groups involved. A divergence of opinion is similarly useful as it can highlight how the issue is perceived by the different groups.

2 Methods of inquiry

In order to collect the necessary data the interviews with key personnel proceeded in three phases:

- Phase 1: (September 1993) interviews with a selection of key individuals from agencies providing adult literacy and numeracy support;
- Phase 2: (December 1993) telephone interviews with selected ABE providers in the public, commercial and voluntary sectors;
- Phase 3: (May 1994) interviews with selected ABE students.

These are outlined briefly below.

Phase 1

This phase involved 22 face-to-face interviews with: a range of public, commercial and voluntary sector providers; key individuals involved in the provision of adult literacy and numeracy and associated or supporting services. These interviews were designed to identify the providers' perspective on the issues raised by the research objectives. In selecting these experts for interview, consideration was taken of the extent of the provision and geographical area for which they had responsibility. Some were also selected on the basis that they were acknowledged authorities on ABE in Northern Ireland. The small sample was intended primarily to generate relevant and appropriate categories for the more structured interview schedule to be used in Phase 2 - the telephone survey of ABE providers.

Phase 2

Phase 2 involved a telephone survey of a sample of the main providers of ABE in Northern Ireland. The sample was designed to reflect the public, commercial and voluntary sectors and full details of the sampling and methods used to collect the data are given in Appendix 1. The sample included:

- all 23 FE colleges;
- a selection of recognised training organisations: twelve providing Job Training Programme (JTP) Foundation Training courses, five providing Training Link courses and one providing both. The sample was drawn from recognised training organisations catering for adults aged 18 or over at the time the research took place;
- three of the four Workers Educational Association (WEA) area divisions, the main voluntary providers of ABE in Northern Ireland. (One of the divisions, Southern Area, does not provide ABE.)

Where possible, the intention was to interview both a tutor and someone with management responsibilities for literacy and numeracy provision, from each selected provider. One hundred such people were identified and contacted. Of these 90 were confirmed as providing ABE and by the end of the phase 62 had been interviewed.

Table 1: *Breakdown of Phase 2 interviewees*

Provider	Co-ordinators	Managers	Tutors	Total
FE Colleges	22		13	35
Recognised Training Organisations		13	10	23
WEA	2		1	3
Totals	24	13	25*	62

* *includes one extra tutor from YMCA*

Phase 3

The final phase of the project focused on the adult learners themselves. Collecting data from such students needs a relatively sensitive approach as they are often shy and reserved people with difficulties in expressing themselves. Methods that rely on reading and writing are clearly inappropriate. Suitable target groups of students were identified by a sub-sample of the providers interviewed in Phase 2. In order to increase the number of interviewees involved and to put them more at ease with peer group support, groups of students were interviewed together using a semi-structured interview schedule. The targeted groups came from five FE colleges, three Training Link courses and one WEA provider. These were selected to include those catering for small and large numbers of students across different parts of Northern Ireland. The interviews were designed to investigate the views of the students on the adequacy of provision, barriers to take-up and how the provision might be improved.

The interview contexts fell into three categories:

- FE college courses offering ABE for students who pay a maximum of five pounds to join the course. These courses are provided on a one class per week basis;
- recognised training organisations offering training for which the students get paid and which offer preparation for mainstream employment training and a work placement. Those courses visited are provided on a 15 or 30 hours a week basis;
- a WEA women's basic English 'Return to Learn' course, with provision for GCSE included, based at a community house on a housing estate. Students pay £1.00 per session and a crèche is included.

The number of students available for interview was limited by the attendance at the particular course on the day or evening arranged for the interviews. For the FE college courses 27 students were interviewed; for the RTO courses, 23 and for the WEA course, five. Fifty-five students in all were interviewed. The information gathered has particular value as it represents the views of the 'consumers' themselves.

The students were interviewed in groups enabling individuals to draw on peer-group support in order to assist them in expressing themselves. For the most part this approach was successful and had the added benefit of encouraging the interviewees to be relatively candid in relation to the course provision. They also spoke freely about their difficulties with literacy and numeracy. The students were interviewed in groups that reflected their normal class groupings using a semi-structured discussion schedule designed for the purpose. The questioning covered issues relating to the students' reasons for being on the course, the barriers or difficulties, if any, that they had overcome to get on their course, their views on their course (information, course content, teaching methods, problems

experienced while on the course and possible improvements); and their aspirations upon finishing the course. The various responses are discussed below and are offered as a basis for the reader to gain an insight into the types of problem adults attending ABE can experience.

3 The context of adult basic education in Northern Ireland

Bodies involved in ABE

The main forum for adult education in the Province is the Northern Ireland Council for Adult Education (NICAE), formed in 1993 as a successor to the Northern Ireland Council for Continuing Education (NICCE). The Adult Literacy and Basic Education Committee (ALBEC) had operated under NICCE and continued to work in the area after the dissolution of NICCE, eventually forming a sub-committee of the new NICAE. ALBEC offers a focus for the common interests of ABE providers and support agencies and includes representatives from the education and library boards, the further and higher education sectors, the Training and Employment Agency (T&EA), the Educational Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA), the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS), the Royal Society of Arts (RSA), the Northern Ireland Prison Education and Training Branch and the Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DENI) Inspectorate. In 1994 ALBEC has as its remit to:

- promote, encourage and review all aspects of basic education for adults including literacy and numeracy;
- maintain links with other bodies with similar interests;
- promote quality standards in the delivery of basic education.

Of the various groups represented, the Educational Guidance Service for Adults has a particularly important rôle as a referral agency offering the expertise of its members in guiding and counselling adults in relation to their learning needs and how they might be met.

Much previous research into ABE provision in the rest of the UK has concentrated on the FE sector, usually the single largest provider. In Northern Ireland this is also the case but it was a stated intention of the project to widen the scope and to include, for example, the foundation training courses offered by the Training and Employment Agency (T&EA) recognised training organisations. Such courses represent the majority of commercially provided ABE programmes. In the voluntary sector the main providing agency is the Workers' Educational Association (WEA). Although Phase 1 of the research also identified other prominent providers, including day centres run by the Health and Social Services Boards, Trust and others and the Northern Ireland Office Prison Education Service, it was decided to focus on the provision offered by the FE sector, the T&EA and the WEA. A brief overview of the main providers is given below.

Further education college-based ABE provision

Adult basic education in Northern Ireland can be traced back to the 1950s in Belfast, with more general provision emerging in response to the BBC's *On The Move* programme in 1975. The provision has developed steadily up to the present with ABE being provided by the Province's education and library boards (ELBs) through their FE colleges in the Belfast, Western, Eastern, Southern and South Eastern regional areas. Each ELB has an

Adult Literacy Referral Officer who co-ordinates provision at the FE colleges within their district. There are currently 23 FE college sites offering ABE programmes in Northern Ireland (some of these colleges have been or are being merged organisationally into larger further and higher education *institutes*) and within each college there is an ABE co-ordinator/tutor organiser who is responsible for provision within that college. While these co-ordinators are responsible for the management of the college's ABE provision, they are also often involved in the ABE teaching itself. The majority of teaching is undertaken by teams of college tutors and volunteer tutors. Organisers and college tutors usually have qualifications in ABE and/or adult education and an emphasis is placed on providing similar training for the volunteer tutors within the colleges.

Training, and employment agency ABE provision

The T&EAs remit to provide training includes the development of basic skills for young adults (16+) as well as those aged over 18. This type of approach originated on a pilot basis as a 'Training Link Facility' at the Falls Development Agency in October 1988. The intention was to address the needs of potential Employment Training Programme (ETP) participants who 'lacked work related skills, motivation or confidence for them to benefit from ETP'. The trainees would hopefully go on to 'take up and benefit from ETP and/or improve their competitiveness for employment, further education or training' (T&EA and the Department of Economic Development - DED, 1993). The aims of a 'Training Link' course were to:

- improve basic skills in literacy and numeracy;
- develop basic computer awareness;
- undertake intensive employment related exercises.

A number of Training Link projects were funded under special initiative funding the two main schemes being: 'Making Belfast Work' and 'Making Londonderry Work'. On the basis of their success 'Foundation Training' courses were developed as an integral part of the Job Training Programme in May 1991. Training Link remains a free-standing provision funded under the 'Making Belfast Work' initiative and all such providers are approved to offer at least one form of accreditation, the most frequently offered being the Royal Society of Arts Practical Skills Profile. Foundation Training as a facility within the mainstream Job Training Programme has as its aim 'to meet the needs of those people who, for one reason or another, are not yet able to proceed to occupational training'. The ethos of the Training Link programme was therefore continued under Job Training Programme Foundation Training. The T&EA is continually moving towards higher levels of standardisation, quality assurance and trainer training. The current number of Training Link providers and Job Training Programme Foundation Training providers is 7 and 41 respectively with two Job Training Programme providers also providing Training Link courses. In addition to these programmes, the T&EA and DENI have worked together on an initiative called the Literacy and Numeracy Development Project (LAND) which ran from April 1991–March 1993, the outcomes of which informed T&EA basic skills provision.

ABE provision by the Workers' Educational Association

The WEA's mission is to 'make adult education more accessible to those who are educationally or socially disadvantaged, and a particular concern must be with those who have been failed by the school system' (WEA 1992). The Association's development plan for 1992-'95 highlights the fact that only 1 in 10 of the adult population participates

in adult education of any kind and that among the remaining 90% there are those who want, or need, a re-entry to the educational system. Of all the provision by WEA, it is the 'Return to Learn' courses that cater most for those adults with basic literacy and numeracy needs, with some courses concentrating on basic English and/or mathematics content. Within the overall Return to Learn course there are classes on assertiveness, personal development and personal effectiveness and these are also considered applicable to adults with ABE needs. In its development plan the WEA specifies that the content of the Return To Learn courses should plan/promote: study skills, communication skills, confidence building and understanding the world of education. The aim is to obtain accreditation for the courses and incorporate educational guidance and counselling. Both measures involve building on existing links with other educational partners and guidance services.

ABE provision by the Department of Health and Social Services

Although not one of the main providers (and therefore not addressed in detail in this report) it should be noted that the Health and Social Services Boards, Trusts and others provide around 40 day centres throughout Northern Ireland, catering mainly for people with mental and/or physical special needs. The centres range in size from 40 to 120 places with some of the larger centres serving a wide range of client groups. Very often the centres draw on outside help with adult literacy tutors coming into the centre to hold classes and/or day centre students attending classes at their local colleges.

Data on ABE participation

In the course of the research the various agencies gave freely of their co-operation and advice and complemented this by providing details of adults' participation in their ABE programmes. Data were made available for the level of qualifications in the Province's population and for the FE sector ABE provision by DENI, for the commercial sector by the T&EA, and for the voluntary sector from the WEA. Additional data on day centre participation were made available by the DHSS. The various details are illustrated and discussed below.

The DENI document: *The Education Service in Northern Ireland: A Strategic Analysis* (DENI 1994) highlights the fact that high percentages of those working (30%) and unemployed (40%) have no qualifications. This suggests that there are significant numbers of adults in Northern Ireland who have 'major difficulties with reading, writing and basic numeracy'. The suggestion is also made that the number of adults in Northern Ireland with basic education needs could be similar to that in England (at around 13%).

The percentage of school leavers who leave with no formal qualifications of any kind (7.4% in GCSE 1991/92), has declined significantly since for example in 1986/87 when it was 17.7% (DENI Statistical Bulletin: School Leavers 1991/92, published July 1994). The decrease in unqualified leavers should mean that a reduction in ABE needs among 'new' adults might be expected. However, at the low end of the qualification scale the percentage of school leavers who leave with GCSE grades D-G (or GCE 'O' level grades D and E, or CSE grades 2-5) was 16.8% in 1991/92 while leavers with equivalent levels of achievement in 1986/87 made up 20.9% a much smaller decrease than above. If this group is a major source of potential ABE students then the relatively small decrease could signal little change in the extent of ABE needs. Similarly those not having any GCSEs, 'O' levels or CSEs but who did achieve qualifications such as RSA, BTEC and City and Guilds have increased only marginally from 2.8% of leavers in 1986/87 to 4.3% in 1991/92 so it would appear that these particular routes are not 'mopping up' significant numbers of those leavers who are not achieving in the GCSE context.

Table 2 sets out the data from DENI on FE-based ABE in 1992/93 showing the numbers of adults participating in ABE in the further education sector:

Table 2: *Numbers of adults participating in FE-based ABE during 1992/3 (source DENI)*

	Basic Literacy	Post-Basic	Totals
General Basic Education	1476	890	2366
Special Needs	811	1	812
Other	98	31	129
Totals	2385	922	3307†

† These figures exclude approximately 175 students in courses catering for English as a second language

The DENI statistics also provide information on the gender, age and employment status of ABE participants and these are outlined in Table 3:

Table 3: *Gender, age range and employment status of participants in FE-based ABE 1992/3 (Source DENI)*

Age (yrs)»	16-24		25-40		41-60		60+		
Gender (M/F)»	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	Totals
Employed F/T	64	46	153	87	51	29	3	0	433
Employed P/T	25	29	41	44	9	17	0	0	165
Unemployed*	283	241	1063	680	255	245	3	4	2774
Retired	0	0	0	0	2	2	24	24	52
Totals	372	316	1257	811	317	293	30	28	3424

* registered unemployed

These figures show that unemployed adults are the most likely participants (81% of total) and of these the majority are male (58%). The most prominently represented age range for the unemployed male and female groups was 25-40 years (66% of the male participants and 58% of the female participants respectively). Among the full-time employed there were more male participants (63%) but female participants slightly outnumbered the males in the case of the part-time employed.

The T&EA statistics on adults participating in Foundation Training courses are not as detailed as the DENI data in terms of gender and age range but a 'snap-shot' survey of participants attending Job Training Programme and Training Link programmes on the 25 March 1994 does give a flavour of the ratios involved.

The gender and age variations are not striking although it is worth noting that the figures for older participants (over 25s represented 59% of the participant population on the day in question) reflect the trend illustrated by the FE-sector. The T&EA also provided data on the numbers and post-course destinations of students attending Training Link and Job Training Programme Foundation Training courses for the period 1 April 1993 - 31 to March 1994.

Table 4: *'Snap-shot' survey of age and gender characteristics of participants on Job Training Programme and Training Link Programmes for 25 March 1994 (source T&EA)*

		AGE (yrs)		
		Under 25	**Over 25**	**Totals**
JTP Foundation Training				
	Male	20	31	51
	Female	12	19	31
Training Link				
	Male	29	42	71
	Female	31	42	73
Totals		92	134	226

Table 5: *Number and post-course destinations of students attending training link and Job Training Programme Foundation Training 1 April 1993-31 March 1994*

		AGE (yrs)		
		Under 25	**Over 25**	**Totals**
JTP Foundation Training				
	Male	20	31	51
	Female	12	19	31
Training Link				
	Male	29	42	71
	Female	31	42	73
Totals		92	134	226

The T&EA programmes are designed with an emphasis on basic education skills for employment and the participants will usually have been referred to the training agencies by local job centres, job clubs and so on. To some extent the T&EA groups also differ from those in the FE sector in that the courses are usually linked to some form of weekly payment and usually offer job placement arrangements. It may therefore be reasonable to suggest that many of these students would not ordinarily have signed up for ABE and that the incentives of this provision are helping to identify more of the ABE needs students that exist. With more than eleven hundred students during the year, there is little doubt that these courses are playing an important role in addressing the needs of adults who have basic literacy and numeracy difficulties.

The figures for participation in the WEA's 'Return to Learn' courses may be gleaned from the Annual Report for 1992/'93 and these are presented in Table 6.

Table 6: *Numbers of adults attending WEA 'Return to Learn' classes 1992/3 (source WEA)*

Class	**Numbers Enrolled**
Assertiveness and Basic Assertiveness	273
Personal Effectiveness/Development	62
Basic English/Mathematics	48
Making Experiences Count	46
Confidence Building	20
Pre-vocational Training	6

The figures cannot simply be aggregated as some of the students in each category will have attended more than one of the classes. Leaving aside the very large number of students attending assertiveness-related classes it is clear that the WEA's basic English and mathematics provision attracts a substantial proportion of its student population.

Participation in the ABE provision of the DHSS promoted day centres was estimated with the assistance of the DHSS and the data are presented in Table 7.

Table 7: *Estimated numbers of adults with ABE needs attending Health and Social Services day centres and Industrial Therapy Organization (ITO) Units (source DHSS)*

Type of Centre	Number of Centres	Number of Adults with ABE Needs
Day centres for people with mental health problems	9	146
Day centres for people with physical disabilities	5	75
Multi-purpose centres catering for a wide range of client groups	19	171
Day centres providing industrial therapy for people with mental health problems	7	126
Totals	40	518

These figures show that the ABE needs of a significant number of adults are addressed by these day centres. Again the type of student is more focused perhaps than those who attend FE sector courses in that they are identified from their participation in the community care support system.

Although the data above cover different years, indeed different geographical areas and providers, it is not unreasonable to project that around 3000 adults are attending FE-based ABE courses, around 1000 are at T&EA courses and that between them the other providers, notably for this study the Health and Social Services and ITO and the WEA, are accounting for 500 or more in any given year. While the type of provision varies greatly from personal development to vocational preparation courses, and from the support offered as part of a community care or job finding service to personally sought after help, all of them address the basic need for literacy and numeracy. It would seem reasonable then to project that something in the order of 4000 to 4500 students are being provided with ABE support in Northern Ireland each year. If the figure quoted above for England (13%) is a reasonable estimate for the proportion of adults needing ABE support, then these figures suggest a substantial under-provision.

4 Empirical findings

The evidence emerging from this study concerned with adult basic education in Northern Ireland comes from three basic sources: a broad range of providing agencies; the actual providers of ABE and thirdly students who are experiencing adult education. The findings are reported below according to these sources of evidence.

Phase 1: An exploratory study

Phase 1 involved 22 face-to-face interviews. In selecting the informants the aim was to obtain views from a range of public, commercial and voluntary sector providers; key individuals involved in the provision of adult literacy and numeracy and associated or supporting services, including adult guidance. These included FE co-ordinators and tutors; staff from the Educational Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA); the Adult Literacy and Basic Education Referral Service; WEA co-ordinators; members of ALBEC and staff responsible for Health and Social Services day centres.

The small sample was intended primarily to generate relevant and appropriate categories for the more structured interview schedule to be used in Phase 2 - the telephone survey of ABE providers - and also to be used to refine the focus of the 'provider' aspect of the project.

The main themes to emerge from Phase 1 focused on the variety of provision, the rôle of networking, access for students, the disposition of participating adults, course staffing and ABE funding. These are outlined briefly below:

Variety of Provision

ABE provision varies in scale, scope and focus across a variety of providers. The main providers were identified as being:

- the education and library boards through the further and higher education institutes at their various college sites
- the commercial training agencies, accredited as 'recognised training organisations' by the T&EA
- the voluntary sector represented mainly by the WEA, and
- other government-based providers such as the Health and Social Services day centres, ITO units and the Northern Ireland Prison Education Service.

The urban and large town areas, and particularly the Belfast area, are seen as having the most comprehensive provision with problems being experienced mainly in the rural and more sparsely populated areas.

Networking

Where it exists, networking between providers was seen as very valuable, particularly in referring adults to appropriate providers. Such networking was largely *ad hoc* but events

such as Adult Learners' Week and groups such as the NICAE and ALBEC, and EGSA with its referral service, were seen making an important contribution.

Access for Students

The various providers perceived the need to travel relatively long distances and/or the lack of travel facilities in rural areas as being particular problems for potential ABE students. In addition, the anxiety of travelling to a college in an area perceived as hostile was noted as a possible access problem for some students.

Dispositional Barriers

Adults living in rural areas were considered to be most likely to be affected by the perceived stigma of having literacy and numeracy needs. For this reason, despite the problems of travel, some were travelling considerable distances to courses where they would not be known.

Some of the FE staff interviewed felt that certain groups of adults were under-represented in their ABE because of attitudinal factors. The main group was seen as young working class males who did not value education for various reasons, including a lack of perceived opportunities available upon completing a programme of learning. Yet another participation barrier was considered to be some adults' lack of confidence in their ability to adapt to a learning environment and to undertake classes or a course.

Staffing

There was a widely held view that all staff should receive training but there was also some concern at the high turn-over rate of volunteer tutors who become qualified and move out of ABE teaching.

Funding Issues

There was evidence that some of the professionals engaged in ABE provision consider that recent policy developments have had an unsettling effect on the system, limiting the ability of providers to develop innovative or lasting structures. On the other hand it was recognised that initiatives like 'Making Belfast Work' could fund innovative ABE-related activities that can run for relatively longer periods. There was some concern that outcome-related funding was becoming more of an issue and that the recognised training organisations might be more cautious when taking on trainees. As a result, adults who require more intensive ABE support, which usually takes longer than the typically 12-week duration of the training schemes, are less likely to be taken on by providers who have to show results to obtain funding. Funding is also an important issue in rural communities where outreach ABE provision is desirable but expensive.

There was a concern, among the FE sector interviewees, that funding from DENI to colleges for ABE is not earmarked. In some cases it was felt that ABE may be underfunded or even overlooked by college managements who prioritise other activities.

■ Phase 2: The views of ABE providers

Phase 2 of the project provided the majority of the data that was gathered and was focused on the providers of ABE programmes and classes. It involved a telephone survey of a sample of the main providers of ABE in Northern Ireland and was designed to reflect the public, commercial and voluntary sectors.

All of the interviews were conducted over the telephone using structured interview schedules. SCRE has extensive experience of telephone surveys having, in the past, managed large scale surveys of mature students, employers, and teaching staff. The quality of data has been found to be as good as that obtained by other methods. Busy teaching staff often prefer to be interviewed over the telephone at a pre-arranged time as this is less intrusive and time consuming than face-to-face interviews. The average length of interview was 35 minutes but some lasted as long as an hour. The questions were informed by the issues raised in the Phase 1.

The interviewees can be divided into two groups: those who had some form of organisational rôle, ie college ABE co-ordinators or Recognised Training Organisation (RTO) course managers, and those who were teaching the courses ie. ABE tutors. (For convenience the term tutor is used to describe both the FE college tutors and the RTO course trainers). The sample included:

- all 23 FE colleges;
- a selection of RTOs: 12 providing Job Training Programme (JTP) Foundation Training courses, five providing Training Link courses and one providing both;
- three of the four Workers Educational Association (WEA) area divisions.

Where possible, the intention was to interview both a tutor and someone with management responsibilities for literacy and numeracy provision, from each selected provider. One hundred such people were identified and contacted. Of these 90 were confirmed as providing ABE and by the end of the phase 62 (37 co-ordinators/managers and 25 tutors) had been interviewed. (See Table 1 for further details of sample.)

Broadly speaking the two groups (the co-ordinators/managers and the tutors) concurred on most issues with occasional divergences of expressed opinions arising from their different rôles or perceptions. In the following report the views presented are the perceptions of the various ABE co-ordinators, managers and tutors and should be treated as such, ie the data arise from the estimations and judgements of the people who actually organise and deliver ABE in the various colleges and RTO sites. The details are presented under the following headings:

- Types of ABE participants
- Reasons for participating
- Barriers to joining ABE Courses
- Attracting adults into ABE
- Funding issues
- Staffing issues
- Networking
- Meeting needs

Types of ABE participants

Both Phase 1 and 2 of the project confirmed that most providers of adult literacy and numeracy and foundation training are obliged to submit very detailed statistical information to their funders, DENI in the case of the further education colleges and T&EA in the case of the recognised training organisations. Nevertheless, it was considered important to collect key information on participants' characteristics from the providers who were interviewed. Table 8 presents the perceptions of the co-ordinators and managers in relation to the gender mix, age range and employment status of the students attending their courses.

Table 8: *Characteristics of adult learners as perceived by co-ordinators/managers (N=37)*

Gender	% (freq) of respondents	Age	% (freq) of respondents
Mostly men	49 (18)	18-20	3 (1)
Mostly women	27 (10)	21-25	3 (1)
About equal	24 (9)	26-29	—
		30-39	22 (8)
		40-49	3 (1)
		50+	—
		Too varied to say	70 (26)
Employment status			
Mainly working		14 (5)	
Mainly unemployed		68 (25)	
Houseperson		3 (1)	
Retired		—	
Too varied to say		16 (6)	

The views expressed broadly endorse the trends discernible in the data from the various providing bodies with an overall impression of more male participants, a significant proportion of the participants being in the 30-39 years age range and the majority of participants being unemployed. The WEA's participants were reported as being mainly female and many of the RTO personnel (14 out of 23) said their participants were mainly males.

Most of the co-ordinators and managers (26 from 37) thought there were certain groups of adult who were under-represented in their provision while the others were not committed on the issue. When asked to identify the under-represented groups the following responses were given:

Table 9: *Under-represented adults in ABE*

Under-represented groups	Co-ordinators/managers (N=26) % (freq)
Women	23 (6)
Unemployed males	19 (5)
People with special needs	19 (5)
Older adults (40+)	12 (3)
Travellers	8 (2)
Ethnic minorities	8 (2)
Mothers with young children	8 (2)
Adults in rural areas	4 (1)

It would appear that rather than being a global issue, under-representation of any particular group was relatively localised to the provider in question who indeed might perceive several groups to be under-represented.

Reasons for participating

When asked to say why they thought adults participated in ABE, i.e. what their motivation was, the co-ordinators and managers presented a pattern of responses similar to that

reported in other studies. Previous SCRE research in other areas of the UK (for example Blair et al 1993) has shown that adults report a wide range of reasons for choosing to do adult basic education. A similar picture, but from the providers' perspective, emerged from this survey. Three reasons for participation stood out: to help with everyday life skills such as calculating the shopping costs; to build confidence and self esteem; and to help find work through developing work skills.

Although a range of motivations was reported across all providers, it was not surprising to note a vocational emphasis being attributed to participants attending courses with the RTOs. In a similar fashion, interviewees representing the FE and voluntary sector cited a desire for personal development and improvement *per se* as a major reason for students' participation. The range of most often cited reasons is shown in Table 10 below.

Table 10: *Reasons for participating in ABE*

Suggested reasons	Co-ordinators/managers citing reason (N=37)* % (freq)
To help with everyday activities	95 (35)
To build confidence	92 (34)
To help find work (CVs etc)	89 (33)
To help in the workplace	81 (30)
To progress to more formal education	81 (30)
To help with children (homeworks etc)	76 (28)
For personal pleasure	76 (28)
To help with another course (learning support)	65 (24)

* *multiple responses*

Attracting adults into ABE

Using the authors' previous research on providers of adult education in Scotland (MacDonald, Lowden and Munn , 1989) and the qualitative information gathered from providers during Phase 1, a questionnaire was designed to collect information from the ABE co-ordinators and managers about the ways in which they attempted to attract adults. The findings are presented in Table 11 below.

Table 11: *Methods cited for attracting adults into ABE*

Method	Co-ordinators/managers citing method* % (freq)
'word of mouth'	100 (37)
students' local knowledge	97 (36)
local advertising	87 (32)
liaison with Community Education and Social Work departments	84 (31)
outreach work	78 (29)
media advertising	76 (28)
liaison with adult education guidance services	76 (28)
'open' day or week	70 (26)
'Restart'-type programmes	51 (19)
prison education service	35 (13)
crèche provision	19 (70)
setting up clubs (eg mother and toddler)	16 (6)

* *multiple responses*

To attract students, providers use a wide range of methods including promotional activities such as local advertising and awareness-raising 'open' days. Personal recommendations, 'word of mouth' contacts from existing participants are very important. The FE colleges also use internal referrals for participants on other college courses. 'Word of mouth' is the most commonly cited method for all adult students seeking guidance about post-school education (Lowden and Powney 1993). It is certainly apposite for this study. Oral communication and dissemination of information is the most appropriate means to reach adults with literacy and numeracy needs and further probing revealed that it was also considered to be the most effective method by 61% of all respondents, with radio and TV advertising being next. The oral message was considered to work especially well in small communities where details of classes or courses, particularly those with good reputations, can get around very quickly.

As might be expected there were some differences in responses from the different types of provider. The FE sector was more likely to use guidance services, open days and outreach as methods of attracting adults to ABE while the RTOs would use media advertising more and would have many of their participants referred to them from local job centres. The WEA also used crèche provision as a pro-active way to attract adults to classes.

Targeting

Another aspect of the interview asked the providers if they actively targeted particular groups for participation. Table 12 summarises the interviewees' responses to three questions: do they target the groups identified? do they receive special funding for the groups involved? and are these groups under-represented on their courses?

Table 12: *Providers' targeting of potential ABE groups (N=37)*

Potential Target Group	Confirmed as a target group % (freq)	Confirmed special funding received % (freq)	Confirmed under-representation % (freq)
People with identified special needs (eg dyslexia, deafness etc)	81 (30)	29 (10)	14 (5)
Unemployed women	68 (25)	22 (8)	27 (10)
Unemployed men	65 (24)	16 (6)	19 (7)
Women with pre-school children	62 (23)	5 (2)	32 (12)
Older adults (over 50s/60s)	38 (14)	5 (2)	32 (12)
Travellers	11 (4)	5 (2)	16 (6)

Clearly the targeting is broadly based and the responses indicated that the interviewees consider some of the groups to be under-represented – most commonly unemployed women, women with pre-school children and the older adults. While the various groups are considered as targets for the courses, it is clear from the responses that funding to provide services for these groups, is less common. For the numbers of providers who target each group about half or less actually receive funding for that group.

The initial interviews with providers, which formed Phase 1 of the project, adds some rationale to the targeting providers. This part of our research indicated that FE providers of ABE felt it was better to publicise their services widely to everyone and so encourage everyone who felt they could benefit to participate. Research on educational guidance providers in Scotland (Lowden and Powney 1993) found a similar rationale among guidance providers. Nevertheless, one could argue that because most providers felt their

courses were still characterised by the absence or under-representation of certain groups that measures to attract these groups and facilitate their participation could be considered.

Barriers to Participation

Previous research (Blair et al 1994) has revealed that adults have to overcome two main barriers to undertaking ABE: *situational* and *dispositional*. Situational barriers are those relating to the 'situation' of the student or the course, eg relating to aspects of finance or travel. Dispositional barriers are those relating to a student's 'disposition' towards ABE or a particular course, ie those barriers relating to attitudes and anxieties. The interviewees were asked to consider potential barriers to students taking up ABE courses and to indicate if they considered them to affect the students they attract. The results are summarised in Table 13.

Table 13: *Potential barriers to participation in ABE cited by interviewees (N=62)*

Potential Barriers	Interviewees % (freq)
Lack of confidence in own abilities	98 (61)
Fear of being identified as having difficulties with literacy and numeracy	94 (59)
Lack of knowledge about ABE opportunities	87 (54)
Unpleasant or unrewarding previous educational experience	81 (50)
Lack of child care opportunities	71 (44)
Anxiety about travelling to classes or courses	58 (36)
Lack of outreach provision in the area	58 (36)
Travelling difficulties	57 (35)
Difficulties in timing of classes	53 (33)
Physical access to courses/classes	52 (32)
Lack of support from family and friends	42 (26)
Unappealing accommodation	27 (17)
Cost of classes	13 (8)

There was no notable difference in perception of the potential barriers between the co-ordinators/managers and the tutors and the data would indicate that the interviewees considered dispositional problems as the main barriers. Previous research (Munn and MacDonald, 1989) on participation has suggested that barriers act hierarchically. For example, factors such as having the necessary finances or physical access to ABE provision may be potential difficulties but might not actually contribute to the problem owing to being overshadowed by a barrier such as fear of being seen as having ABE needs. Unless this type of barrier is overcome the other factors are, for all intents and purposes, secondary barriers. Such dispositional barriers can be more difficult for providers to address with the result, as noted earlier, that the most favoured methods of attracting adults were based around the 'personal touch', eg of the word of mouth approach.

Funding Issues

In the first phase of the project, the importance of funding was highlighted by all respondents. Levels of funding and the constraints which could limit accessibility to funding and resources were seen as having a direct impact on the ability of providers, such as those in the FE sector, to reach adults with ABE needs, particularly in rural communities where the costs of outreach provision are high. Funding from DENI to colleges is not necessarily earmarked and ABE may therefore be overlooked by college managements.

With the new models of funding based on the types and numbers of students it remains to be seen whether or not ABE will attract a larger share of college budgets.

For the RTO managers there was particular concern that as outcome related funding becomes more of an issue, the training agencies might be more cautious when taking on trainees. Courses for students who require more intensive support than that allowed by the conventional training programmes, may not be considered economically viable by commercial training agencies.

Knowledge about Funding

Not all of the co-ordinators/managers (21 out of 37) were well informed about the financial aspects of their provision nevertheless it was possible to gather information about what 'elements' were used to calculate costs. The cost items cited by the interviewees are summarised in Table 14 below.

Table 14: *Elements used to calculate costs of ABE provision*

Cost Item	Co-ordinators/Managers (N=21)* % (freq)
Teaching staff salaries	95 (20)
ABE teaching materials	95 (20)
Travel and subsistence for staff	71 (15)
Publicity and information	66 (14)
Staff training	62 (13)
Non-teaching staff salaries	57 (12)
Accommodation	48 (10)
Types of classes (eg, one-to-one)	42 (9)
Assessment costs	42 (9)
Fees from students	33 (7)
Outreach work	26 (6)
Crèche	5 (1)
Other	5 (1)

* *multiple responses*

Clearly, as one might expect, salaries, materials, travel and subsistence, and publicity all figure prominently in cost calculations but it is worthy of note that staff training also featured relatively prominently. The Phase 1 work had suggested that a high priority is placed on staff development and training in ABE in Northern Ireland and this is endorsed here. It is also notable that crèche and child care provision was not a prominent element in calculating costs.

Effects of Levels of Funding on Provision

The interviewees were asked if they thought the funding available for their ABE provision was sufficient. As might be expected some informants stated simply that they could always do with more money but the general feelings on the adequacy of funding for their provision are presented in Table 15 below.

Table 15: *Adequacy of funding for ABE as perceived by the interviewees (N=62)*

Adequate Funding?	Interviewees % (freq)
Yes	37 (23)
No	60 (37)
Don't know	2 (3)

The general perception was that the level of funding for ABE was inadequate and the follow-up questions sought to identify what effects the interviewees considered the situation had on their courses and course provision. Of the total of 62 interviewees 37 cited various effects and these are summarised in Table 16 below.

Table 16: *Effects of inadequate funding on ABE provision cited by the interviewees (N=37)*

Perceived Effect	Interviewees % (freq)*
Limits available resources generally	57 (21)
Limits numbers of paid tutors	43 (16)
Restricts course flexibility	27 (10)
Limits improvement of courses	24 (9)
Limits quality of accommodation	14 (5)
Causes students to have to pay higher fees	8 (3)
Limits advertising	3 (1)
Limits physical access for students with special needs	3 (1)

* *multiple responses*

A second follow-up question asked how the interviewees would use extra funding if they were given it and the responses are summarised in Table 17 below.

Table 17: *Likely spending areas for additional funding*

Spending Area	Co-ordinators/Manager (N=37) % (freq)	Tutors (N=25) % (freq)
More ABE materials	62 (23)	64 (16)
More teaching staff	46 (17)	32 (8)
Better accommodation for teaching	34 (12)	24 (6)
More publicity and information	27 (10)	4 (1)
Staff training	24 (9)	4 (1)
General improvement of service	16 (6)	20 (5)
More support staff (eg admin)	14 (5)	4 (1)
More outreach	14 (5)	20 (5)
Monitoring and evaluation	14 (5)	8 (2)
More guidance for adults	8 (3)	12 (3)
Reducing costs to adults	8 (3)	12 (3)
Crèche provision	8 (3)	12 (3)
Travelling expenses for volunteers	5 (2)	8 (2)
Pay for staff meetings	3 (1)	—

**multiple responses*

From Table 17 it is clear that for the most part the organisers/managers and the tutors agree on the likely spending areas for any additional funds; with the understandable emphasis on the part of the managers for more publicity, more staff training and more support staff. Again it is evident that crèche provision is not a high priority although the figures do not reveal if the interviewees considered any existing provision to be satisfactory and therefore that did not identify a need for additional spending. Although spending additional money on monitoring and evaluation and better guidance for adults was not perceived as a priority this may also have been due to the view that these matters were considered to be adequately resourced.

Staffing Issues

The section on funding confirmed the emphasis on matters relating to staffing and the survey developed the issues by looking at the providers' levels of staffing, their qualifications, current staff-student ratios and perceptions of how adequately qualified and skilled the providers thought they were.

Numbers of Staff

The co-ordinators/managers were asked to estimate the numbers of staff they had engaged on ABE course provision and their responses are summarised in Table 18.

Table 18: *Numbers of ABE teaching staff in the sample of providers (N=37)*

Numbers of Staff	Full-time Staff % (freq)	Part-time Staff % (freq)	Voluntary Staff % (freq)
1-5	59 (22)	62 (23)	11 (4)
6-10	11 (4)	14 (5)	22 (8)
11-20	3 (1)	—	19 (7)
21+*	—	6 (2)	9 (3)
Don't know	27 (10)	19 (7)	41 (15)

** includes two providers with 50+ part-time staff and one with 60+ voluntary staff*

The number of managers who were not in a position to provide the relevant information is surprising.

Staff-Student Ratios

Providers were asked to specify their current staff to student ratios and then whether this was appropriate. For those who said their ratios were not appropriate we asked them to specify what their preferred ratio would be. Table 19 shows the current ratios. For this question we asked the co-ordinators/managers for the provider wide ratio; tutors/trainers were asked for the ratios on their courses.

Table 19: *Current staff-student ratios*

Ratio	Co-ordinators/Managers % (freq)	Tutors % (freq)
1:1	11 (4)	4 (1)
1:2 to 1:5	19 (7)	36 (9)
1:6 to 1:8	35 (13)	4 (1)
1:9 to 1:13	27 (10)	36 (9)
1:14+	5 (2)	12 (2)
Don't know	8 (3)	8 (2)

From this table it would appear that the most common staff-student ratio for ABE lies somewhere between 1:6 and 1:13 but a significant number of respondents did report ratios in the ranges 1:2 to 1:5. When asked if they thought the ratios were acceptable the tutors expressed mixed views (48% for and 48% against) while the co-ordinators/managers were marginally of the view that they were acceptable (54% for and 40% against). On further probing, both groups indicated that 1:1 ratios were ideal but not realistic and that ratios in the range 1:2 to 1:5 were more realistic. However the respondents made the point that the ideal ratio depended on the nature of the students and their needs. For example, adults with special physical needs or with very limited literacy or numeracy, might need 1:1 or 1:2 tuition while those with 'brush-up' needs could be catered for with less favourable staff-student ratios.

Staff Qualifications

The co-ordinators and managers were asked about the proportions of full-time, part-time and volunteer staff who had qualifications in the teaching of adults, in teaching literacy and numeracy and in guidance or counselling. In Table 20 we can see that just over half (54%) of the managers/co-ordinators said that all of their full-time ABE staff had specific qualifications in teaching literacy with 8% claiming that none of their full-time staff had such qualifications. The providers reported that voluntary ABE staff are less well qualified: only 11% said all of their part-time staff had qualifications in teaching literacy and 22% said that none of their part-time staff had such qualifications. This pattern repeats across the teaching skill areas.

Table 20: *ABE teaching staff qualifications as cited by the co-ordinators and managers (N=37)*

Type of Staff	Qualifications in: Teaching Literacy %(freq)	Teaching Numeracy %(freq)	Teaching Adults %(freq)	Guidance/Counselling %(freq)
Proportion of: Full-time ABE Staff				
All	54 (20)	35 (13)	46 (17)	24 (9)
About 75	5 (2)	3 (1)	11 (4)	3 (1)
About 50	5 (2)	11 (4)	5 (2)	16 (6)
About 25	5 (2)	8 (3)	5 (2)	11 (4)
None	8 (3)	22 (8)	8 (3)	22 (8)
Don't Know	22 (8)	22 (8)	24 (9)	24 (9)
Proportion of: Part-time ABE Staff				
All	32 (12)	24 (9)	38 (14)	16 (6)
75%	8 (3)	5 (2)	5 (2)	—
50%	8 (3)	3 (1)	3 (1)	5 (2)
25%	16 (6)	14 (5)	22 (8)	16 (6)
None	19 (7)	38 (14)	19 (7)	43 (16)
Don't Know	16 (6)	16 (6)	14 (5)	19 (7)
Proportion of: Voluntary ABE Staff				
All	11 (4)	3 (1)	3 (1)	—
75%	5 (2)	3 (1)	3 (1)	—
50%	—	—	—	—
25%	27 (10)	14 (5)	14 (5)	11 (4)
None	22 (8)	46 (17)	41 (15)	51 (19)
Don't Know	35 (13)	35 (13)	41 (15)	38 (14)

These figures do not indicate whether individual teaching staff had one or more of these qualifications. However, it is clear that the members of staff who possess qualifications in at least one of the skills areas decreases as one looks at the part-time and then the voluntary staff. We must be careful in interpreting these figures because managers and co-ordinators were not always able to provide details on the qualifications held by their staff. Therefore, it is possible that the figures shown under-represent the real level of qualifications but they do highlight the need for more information on the levels of qualified staff.

Providers stressed qualifications in ABE related teaching skills were important but, as shown in Table 21, needed to be seen in the context of the personal qualities of staff.

Table 21: *Personal qualities of an effective ABE tutor as cited by the interviewees (N=62)*

Personal Quality	Interviewees Citing Quality % (freq)
An effective ABE tutor ...	
is empathetic	63 (39)
is patient	37 (23)
is aware of adults' needs	32 (20)
is a good listener	27 (17)
treats learners as adults	21 (13)
has commitment/motivation	19 (12)
is approachable	10 (6)
is a good organiser	7 (4)
is able to encourage	5 (3)
has common sense	5 (3)
has maturity	2 (1)

* *multiple responses*

This table shows the range of personal qualities perceived by providers as helping to make for effective ABE teaching and reveals that empathy and patience are rated very highly. The tutors differed from the co-ordinators/managers in stressing the importance of being aware of the adult's needs (56% of tutors compared to 16% of co-ordinators/managers) otherwise both groups broadly agreed on the qualities of an effective ABE tutor.

While the importance of personal qualities cannot be overlooked, the providers stressed that they were actively pursuing staff development policies. This was demonstrated by the fact that 84% (31) of the co-ordinators and 80% (20) of the tutors reported that their ABE provision included a formal staff development policy. A number of the providers considered that there were always staff who required training which for the most part, comprised the City and Guilds 9282 and 9285, guidance training and the RSA literacy and numeracy qualification.

The providers were also asked whether any previous experience was considered relevant to their current ABE teaching. The most common types of relevant previous experience was cited as teaching experience including qualified school teaching and voluntary ABE teaching. The range of relevant experience also included that gained from raising children, and two co-ordinators mentioned having been an ABE student themselves.

When questioned about the length of time they had worked in ABE our respondents gave the following details:

Table 22: *Experience in ABE*

Length of Experience (Yrs)	Co-ordinators/Managers (N=37) % (freq)	Tutors (N=25) % (freq)
less than 1	—	4 (1)
1 - 3	27 (10)	40 (10)
4 - 6	22 (8)	32 (8)
7 - 10	27 (10)	8 (2)
10 +	24 (9)	16 (4)

Not surprisingly, the co-ordinators and managers have spent relatively longer working in ABE.

When asked to estimate the proportion of their own time and that of their staffs that they and their staff spent on teaching ABE, the responses of the co-ordinators and managers were as presented in Table 23.

Table 23: *Time spent actually teaching ABE*

Proportion of Time	Co-ordinators/Managers % (freq)	Tutors % (freq)
All of the time	11 (4)	32 (8)
75% of time	32 (12)	44 (11)
50% of time	14 (5)	20 (5)
25% of time	19 (7)	—
Varies according to post	24 (9)	4 (1)

According to the interviewees, the majority of ABE-related staff spend about 75% of their time teaching ABE. The other duties reported for their ABE teaching staff were predominantly administration related to the courses (76% of the respondents quoted this) with smaller proportions quoting activities such as course development, development of teaching materials, guidance, recruitment and induction and marketing.

Networking

Almost all of the co-ordinators and managers reported being part of a network (81%, 30) with a smaller but still sizeable proportion of the tutors reporting similar involvement (68%, 17). The interviewees were asked to identify the other members of their networks and Table 24 summarises their responses.

Table 24: *Other members of ABE provider networks as identified by the interviewees*

Other Members	Co-ordinators/Managers (N=30) % (freq)	Tutors (N=17) % (freq)
Recognised training organisations	76 (23)	64 (11)
Guidance services	73 (21)	71 (12)
Community groups	70 (21)	52 (9)
FE colleges	66 (20)	82 (14)
Voluntary groups	63 (19)	47 (8)
Religious organisations	23 (7)	29 (5)
Social services	20 (6)	—
Prison service	10 (3)	6 (1)
Job centres	10 (3)	—

This table would suggest that the co-ordinators/managers link with broadly the same groups as the tutors with the latter perhaps linked to a greater extent with the FE colleges. The table confirms the importance placed in links with the guidance services such as Educational Guidance Service for Adults.

When the providers were asked whether, or not, their network was useful in improving the efficiency of their provision, 76% (28) of the co-ordinators and 82% (14) of the tutors thought that it was. The main reasons given for this were that these contacts had proved

useful in terms of the effective referral of adults, in reducing the feeling of isolation of the providers, and in providing useful information about ABE developments.

For a minority of the sample (7 co-ordinators and 8 tutors) who were not part of a wider provider network, the two reasons given were a lack of awareness of the other providers or a fear of competition. Nevertheless, these respondents acknowledged beneficial aspects of being part of a network.

Meeting the Students' Needs

The information gathered in Phase 2 was helpful in giving insights into the providers' perceptions of several aspects of their provision; the range and levels of ABE provided, the progression from their provision; assessment of students' needs; the guidance they provide and the monitoring and evaluation they undertake to maintain the relevance and effectiveness of their provision. These issues are considered below.

The Types of ABE provided

Table 25 shows the range of levels and content of ABE that the interviewees provide.

Table 25: *The types of ABE provided as cited by the co-ordinators/managers (N=37)*

	Levels	
	Basic (equivalent to Foundation level BSAI) % (freq)	**Post basic (pre-GCSE) % (freq)**
Content		
General literacy	97 (36)	54 (20)
General numeracy	95 (35)	35 (13)
Specific employment foundation skills	62 (23)	19 (7)
personal and social skills	70 (26)	32 (12)

This table shows us that the providers were more likely to deliver basic rather than post-basic education. Specific foundation courses were provided, as one might expect, mainly by the recognised training organisations. Courses addressing personal and social education matters were also provided for students in the 'basic' category and to a lesser extent for those in the post-basic category.

The numbers of ABE providers in the further education sector who provided learning support for students doing other courses in the college was 83% (19). This type of provision usually entailed putting on extra classes for a specific difficulty (8); support for special needs (3); general study skills courses (3); providing a specialised support centre in the college (2) and other forms of learning support (3). The most common size of a learning support class was in the range 6-10 students and the next most common was large classes of 30 or more.

Progression from ABE courses

Table 26 presents the findings from both co-ordinators/managers and tutor/trainers on what happens to students after completion of ABE courses.

It is apparent from this table that progression from the ABE courses was common and was also usually to a higher (ie non-ABE) level of provision. This type of progression was likely to be to another course within the same college or agency. Progression to other ABE courses within the same college or agency was also common. It is not clear whether this

entailed progression to 'higher' levels of ABE, for example progression from basic to post-basic. Progression to employment was also common.

Table 26: *Progression from ABE courses*

Type of Progression	Co-ordinators/Managers (N=36) % (freq)	Tutors (N=24) % (freq)
Progression to non-ABE courses within the college/agency	78 (29)	60 (15)
Progression to employment	68 (25)	84 (21)
Progression to other ABE courses within the college/agency	65 (24)	56 (14)
Progression to non-ABE courses provided by another college/agency	60 (22)	36 (9)
Progression to other ABE courses provided by another college/agency	43 (16)	40 (10)
Other types of progression occur	8 (3)	20 (5)
No progression occurs	3 (1)	4 (1)

Assessing students' needs

The providers were asked whether or not their adult learners received any assessment of their needs and guidance once they had decided to join ABE classes or courses and almost all of the interviewees said that they do. The methods used for the assessment are summarised in Table 27.

Table 27: *Methods used by providers to assess students' needs*

Method of Assessment	Interviewees Citing Method (N=60) % (freq)
Negotiation with student to assess appropriate content	98 (59)
Negotiation with student to assess appropriate mode of study	93 (56)
Tests to assess levels of competence in literacy and numeracy	65 (39)

The most common form of assessing students' needs once they approach the provider, is negotiation of the content and mode of study appropriate to the student. The use of tests to assess the students' levels of competence was less common and, as Phase 1 had shown, the providers were reluctant to use such formal testing because of the negative association adults made between such methods of assessment and examinations.

Guidance for the Students

Once students started their courses, on-going guidance was one way of providing support and advice. The providers who offered guidance and advice to the students were asked to identify who provided the advice and the findings are presented in Table 28.

Table 28: *Sources of guidance and advice as cited by the interviewees (N=60)*

Source of Advice	Number of Interviewees Citing Source % (freq)
ABE teaching staff	100 (60)
External advisors	62 (21)
Specific guidance staff	30 (18)

As one might expect, the ABE teaching staff were considered the main source of guidance once the students had started their course. It is perhaps surprising however that the providers considered that the next most common source of advice was from advisors outside the college or agency. It is possible that these people could have been careers service or educational guidance personnel but there is insufficient evidence to corroborate this.

The kinds of advice the interviewees considered the students to ask for most often are listed in Table 29.

Table 29: *Types of advice sought be the ABE students*

Type of Advice	Number of Interviewees Citing Type of Advice (N=62) % (freq)
Advice on further study	85 (53)
Advice on personal matters	76 (47)
Advice on learning skills	76 (47)
Advice on course content difficulties	74 (46)
Advice on employment	73 (45)
Financial advice	45 (28)
Don't know	2 (1)
Other	3 (2)

Given the high degree of progression to other courses, it is perhaps not surprising that the most common demand for guidance is for advice on further study. Advice on personal matters (eg events in their domestic and family situations such as partners attitudes and levels of support which could impinge on their courses) also featured on a par with course content difficulties, learning skills and employment. In relation to guidance training, 89% (33) of the co-ordinators and managers said their ABE teaching staff required more training in providing adult guidance . Similarly when the tutors were asked whether they felt they could benefit from having specialist guidance training, 84% (21) said yes.

Monitoring and evaluation of ABE provision

The providers were asked to comment on any monitoring and evaluation they undertook, including informal feedback, in relation to the classes they offered. Of the co-ordinators/ managers, 92% (34) said that they monitored their provision and 96% (24) of the tutors said that monitoring and evaluation did take place. The methods of monitoring and evaluation used are presented in Table 30.

Table 30: *Methods of monitoring and evaluation used by providers*

Method of Monitoring	Number of Interviewees Citing Method (N=58) % (freq)
Informal teacher feedback	97 (56)
Informal student feedback	97 (56)
Attendance records	91 (53)
Programme completion rates	81 (47)
Drop out rates	78 (45)
Use of recognised standards of provision (eg ALBSU)	74 (43)
Formal student evaluation	60 (35)
Formal external evaluation	60 (35)
Monitoring of destinations	47 (27)
Tests for students on what they have learned	43 (25)
Other methods	3 (2)

The monitoring and evaluation of ABE provision is clearly taken seriously with no major difference of opinion between the co-ordinators/managers and the tutors. Informal feedback is the most common form of monitoring provision but other more systematic and formal methods, in particular the ALBSU Quality Standards, are also commonly used. In addition the more obvious indicators such as completion rates and withdrawal rates are used as ways of monitoring the effectiveness of provision.

The task of carrying out the monitoring and evaluation of the ABE provision usually fell to the co-ordinators/managers or to the tutors as shown by the responses of the interviewees presented in Table 31.

Table 31: *Responsibility for monitoring ABE provision as cited by the providers interviewed (N=58)*

Person Responsible	Number of Interviewees Citing Each Category % (freq)
The person with responsibility for adult education	86 (50)
ABE Tutors	83 (48)
Guidance staff	24 (14)
Other	14 (8)

The information gleaned from the evaluations was invariably used to improve the courses (quoted by 72%, 42 of the interviewees) with smaller numbers of respondents quoting purposes such as staff training, gearing the courses to learners' needs, identifying students who are struggling with courses, accountability to funders and effective costing of courses.

Four respondents said they did not carry out any evaluation or monitoring, giving their reasons as not having sufficient resources, high demands on staff time and uncertainty about how to go about monitoring their provision. The Phase 1 work showed that these are indeed real pressures which can constrain providers when attempting to monitor their courses.

Summary of issues raised by providers

A range of ABE provision exists in Northern Ireland but the most common type is a foundation learning approach covering general literacy and numeracy. The providers who were interviewed considered women and young (20-25 year old) unemployed men to be under-represented adults in ABE provision. The greatest barriers faced by adults with ABE needs, according to providers, are dispositional, ie lack of confidence in their abilities or fear of being seen as having such needs. According to providers, progression from ABE courses is common and is usually to accredited, non-ABE courses.

Providers across all sectors placed an importance on assessing the needs of their participants individually upon entry. This allowed them to help tailor provision to the aims and abilities of individuals. Monitoring and evaluation of their provision was also extensive, using many criteria including ALBSU Quality Standards. To increase effectiveness further, providers were usually a part of a network. This benefited their service in that referrals were improved and the transmission of information and advice between staff was facilitated.

Despite the above efforts of providers in attempting to meet the needs of participants, they felt that insufficient funding limited the extent, content and ability of their courses to meet fully the challenges they faced.

The providers' full-time and part-time staff were generally well qualified in the teaching of adults and the teaching of ABE. However volunteer staff, who made up the majority of the staffing in many sites, were less well qualified. All providers thought their teaching staff could benefit from qualification in adult educational guidance.

Phase 3: The views of adult learners

Reasons for participating

From the students' accounts it is possible to gain insights into the reasons for their lack of basic skills. For example, one person said the reason for not having sufficient literacy and numeracy skills was that she came from a big family and that while her brothers and sisters were encouraged and 'pushed on' by their parents, she had not been. Another person had missed school for two years through illness and wanted to catch up. The variety in students' motives for participation also highlight the challenge to providers to be flexible enough to meet the diverse range of needs.

As one might expect, the main motivation for participants on the RTO courses was predominantly vocational - for the most part these people wanted to learn new skills or to 'brush-up' old ones with a view to help them eventually to find work. On the RTO courses, the students' motivation for participating was clearly linked to their wishes, ultimately, to be placed in a job as part of that course. Being paid to be on the course, was also a clear incentive. All these students were unemployed and their ability varied but some people had serious reading and writing difficulties. For example, one person had been in a 'dead end job' and wanted to acquire basic skills to get better employment. In contrast a woman had taken a previous 'Return to Study' course at a FE college and had gone on to do *''O' levels'*. However, as she had not worked in 15 years (to bring up a family) she felt she needed to brush-up her skills and confidence.

On the whole students were realistic about job opportunities. Although some RTO students referred to 'hassle' or encouragement from the employment services to participate in adult education, they admitted to not 'seeing the logic' of participation given what they considered were the poor employment prospects and the disappointments they had experienced in applying for work.

Similarly some of the unemployed participants on the FE college courses perceived very poor employment prospects and saw little use in participating for vocational reasons. Still others felt they were too old for new job skills and were attending specifically for personal development reasons. Many of the students on the FE and WEA courses were employed and wanted literacy and numeracy skills to help them cope with their current employment. Of equal importance to the FE participants and of more importance to the WEA participants, was the need to obtain skills for other aspects of their lives, including personal development and helping with their children's homework.

The FE based ABE courses were attended by people almost all of whom had serious reading and writing difficulties. A significant proportion of these, (around half), were employed in low level jobs which had begun to demand reading and writing skills in their day to day activities. For example, one person was required to read the hazard warnings on herbicide sprayers, another was required to read information from an engine diagnostics machine and another, in her capacity as shop steward for cleaning staff, had to write brief

notes. Others expressed the wish to be able to read and write for domestic and personal development reasons (eg to help with their children's homework). The majority of students were clearly committed and earnest in their intentions, some of them declaring that their difficulties worried them.

On the WEA course, the women were attending mainly for personal reasons, including 'getting out of the house', or simply 'I wanted to do English and it was on offer'. Another stressed her need to get help with writing and spelling. Three of the five students wanted skills to help their children with their homework while one woman was attending for mainly vocational reasons in that she wanted to work with people with special needs.

Barriers to participating in ABE

For the agency based courses, the incentives of a weekly payment and a guaranteed work placement may have overcome any dispositional or situational barriers as very few people claimed to have experienced any. Of those who did, one mentioned having not come on the course earlier because of family commitments. One man said there had not been enough choice in the provision offered in West Belfast and this was responsible for his not participating earlier. He was fearful about travelling into the city centre to participate there. For the same reasons others said they would consider attending at a city centre site but not other areas. It was interesting that some students said the proposal to open a University of Ulster campus in West Belfast might help ameliorate such difficulties in job training.

In the case of the FE College provision, a variety of barriers was conceded to exist, the most notable among these being the fee required. While many of the students were employed and had even been encouraged to take the course, their employers did not assist with the fees. Other costs of participation such as those incurred in travelling to the college were mentioned: for example, some people had to travel between 12 and 15 miles and this meant additional expenditure on fares. Most of the people involved had low incomes and such travel costs were likened light-heartedly to 'paying a mortgage' but as it was something they had to do, they accepted the cost.

Many of the students lived locally and did not have travel problems. Instead they reported problems relating to the time of their course eg when their partners were not available and they had to make alternative arrangements for child-minding. Other problems included the courses clashing with evening meal times or with evening work hours. Some learners, who had children, said that crèche facilities were not always available and this affected whether or not they could attend. Indeed, lack of childcare support had clearly prevented some women from participating earlier. In addition, lack of awareness about what was on offer was mentioned by several people. One woman recalled having difficulty in getting information from 'administration' staff at the college and that this could have prevented her joining a class had she not persisted.

The women on the WEA course felt that aside from their present course there was little suitable provision in their area. All of the other courses were seen as being too far (at least six miles) away, particularly when it cost £5.00 for a return journey. The women mentioned that the combination of a 'community house' as the point of delivery and the fact their 'teacher' had taught them while they were at school, was something that had encouraged them to participate and helped them overcome initial worries. However, they all felt that they would like to have more choice of provision when the time came to progress to the next stage.

Several of the FE college students spoke of the worry about what they were *'in for'* - was it like school where they had had difficult and unhappy experiences? Several had been shy, lacked confidence and were a little ashamed about their difficulties but reported that this quickly dissipated when they actually came on the course and met others in the 'same boat'. One man, who was having difficulties at work with his reading skills, said he was always nervous and had been so from the start. His wife had arranged his enrolment and although his anxiety remained, he was committed and determined to attend. The importance of support from partners, family and friends in helping adults with ABE needs to participate was alluded to by many of the interviewees. The students also spoke of others they knew who were too shy to enrol, who had enrolled and not come, or had gone to colleges outside their own locality. One student's view illustrates a common perception:

> *... It's difficult to come in. It was the hardest thing I had to do in my life. Then when you do [come in] you find it easy ...*

There were indications that the participants felt a certain stigma in attending such a course but for the most part the interviewees emphasised the positive aspects. Issues such as the acceptability of names for courses (in one college they deliberately called it 'Adult English' rather than 'Adult Literacy') did not seem to concern the students unduly and in one instance a student was heard to say that she looked forward to her *'slow learners' class'*. On the WEA course, all five of the interviewees mentioned being worried about *'looking stupid'* and professed a lack of confidence that they would be able to cope on the course. One woman said: 'It's really hard to make the first move, but when you do it's really good'. They found that once they got started on their course they could 'get their brain working again' to help cope with the content.

The students on the RTO courses reported minimal anxiety perhaps because they perceived the course as a compulsory part of the job seeking process which they were engaged in. The courses were offered on a full or part-time basis and no one reported difficulties in fitting the course in with their other commitments - indeed they found the flexibility of the part-time 15 hour course to be an added attraction. Travel was also not a problem as the costs incurred were paid.

Assessment of needs

On joining their various courses, all students had been assessed in some way. In the case of the FE college and WEA courses the assessment was on a one-to-one basis, an informal 'ice-breaking' meeting to put the student at ease and to probe the sorts of difficulties or needs they had. In the RTO courses the assessment was part of an induction period of up to three days with a variety of activities designed to give the tutors an assessment of the student's needs. One-to-one interviews and some pen-and-paper testing contributed to the assessment. In all groups the outcome was some level of tailoring of the subsequent course to the student's needs.

Information and guidance

The extent of pre-course advice and information reported by the interviewees in relation to courses in the FE colleges was found to be variable. Most had contacted the tutor or college to get details about the class times and the content was discussed and negotiated during the first class. Students accepted that leaflets would not be of particular use to those with literacy problems and some also held the view that they did not need advice prior to their course.

Information was freely given during courses if students asked, but the higher student to tutor ratios on the RTO courses meant that some students were more in the dark about matters relating to their learning programme. Guidance on the FE courses covered advice about going on to take exams (eg RSA) but no mention was made of special careers guidance.

The students on the WEA course felt that they had not received detailed information or advice about the course prior to participating but it had been available at the nearest WEA women's centre, six miles away, during an open day. Information and advice was available during the course for those who wanted it and students were informed about locally provided GCSE courses. Informal advice and information about opportunities after the course was given but the students felt that they had not really talked much about this.

Course content

In broad terms the RTO courses all followed a similar pattern as validated by the T&EA while the FE college courses were more individually designed within the general framework of meeting literacy and numeracy needs. The RTO courses targeted general vocational skills at a level the students could cope with, eg some students could be developing their basic literacy while others could be developing word-processing and other computer skills. Reading, writing, job seeking skills (eg developing CVs etc), confidence building discussions, problem-solving tasks and computer-based activities were features of the RTO courses. Because the programmes were tailored as much as possible to individual needs the students felt that the content was shaped by them; if anything was missing they could ask for it to be included.

In the FE college courses, the tuition was almost entirely in the context of basic literacy, mainly reading and writing, delivered in an individualised manner, but often with the collective goal of taking a 'qualification' such as the Associated Examining Board's Achievement Test in Literacy. The WEA course focused on a variety of areas including letter writing, comprehension, reading, spelling and confidence building. Some of the students were studying with the intention of doing a GCSE English examination. The students were sufficiently aware of the issues to say that they felt that the course did not really cover enough material to deal with the examination. Four hours instead of two hours per week was considered preferable. Apart from these points, there was general satisfaction with the content of the course.

The FE students reported occasional 'homework' (eg extension materials and reading revision) while the WEA students were often asked to do homework. Homework was set that was sometimes seen as being difficult to complete because of home commitments. Some students felt it would be useful to have a 'homework session' where their children were cared for while the homework was done. For the most part the RTO students did not have homework. None of the students in any of the three types of provision gave any indication of being overworked while many assessed the work as being acceptably challenging.

Teaching approach

The RTO courses tended to have a 'core' programme with a mixture of group and individualised activities, the latter being more tailored to the individual student. For the most part the FE college courses followed individualised programmes of learning (reading, vocabulary and number work related to the student's expressed needs, whether

in a work or domestic context) with one-to-one tutor support and group discussion activity helping to build confidence. Both the RTO and FE courses followed fixed date schedules but students could join the courses on a fairly flexible basis. The WEA course was taught as a group including discussion.

The use of video and computers was more evident on the RTO courses than the others. Some of the WEA students thought that they would be useful for learning but others saw computers as 'frightening'.

The qualities of ABE tutors

The students' views of what made a good ABE tutor corroborated those expressed in the Phase 2 telephone survey. The tutor in the WEA course was seen by all as approachable, helpful and patient - 'like one of the girls'. A good tutor was patient, a good listener, treated students as adults, was easy to get on with, understood the pressures on students and respected students' differing abilities and needs. Most students across the three types of provision felt their tutors possessed such qualities, contrasting markedly with the picture so many of them painted of their own school teachers telling them that they were stupid.

Environment and available resources

The RTO courses were in bright, modern or modernised buildings with a professional and purposeful ambience. The resources in terms of discussion materials, computers and work areas were clearly evident. It was interesting that despite the comparatively high level of computer resources the students still expressed a wish for more computer access. In comparison, the FE ABE courses were in less modern, conventional classroom settings (including 'portacabin' classrooms) with little in the way of accessible resources. One could argue that access to computers would not be a priority in the type of courses offered but one person did express the view that it would be a good idea because familiarity with computers is required in so many jobs. In at least one relatively strongly put case, the resources for reading material were claimed to be inadequate, even in the college's library (which was not available to the students in the evening sessions). In one case, where the library provision was limited, the tutor attempted to photocopy materials but this was seen as being quite limited as well. Providers are also aware of this problem according to the findings of the telephone survey which indicated that any additional funding would first be spent on more staff and resources.

Problems experienced while on the course

Very few of the students reported experiencing difficulties on their course. Some students on the FE based courses reported transport and childcare related difficulties and some said more flexibility in attendance times would be helpful in coping with other commitments. Other problems were outside the control of providers with, for example, some WEA students mentioning the lack of 'peace and quiet' at home that hampered their attempts to do homework. The RTO students did not report any difficulties experienced on their courses.

Possible improvements

When asked how the ABE courses in general might be improved to meet adults' needs the initial response from the interviewees was that they were happy with the provision. Further probing revealed the resource issues noted above and, in the case of the FE college students, the wish to have some form of assistance with fees. The tuition was enthusiastically endorsed and the tutors were praised in all cases, with a clear sense of gratitude apparent

in the sentiments expressed. While the contact time in the RTO courses was judged appropriate, the FE and WEA groups expressed a clear wish for more time per week. The WEA students wanted at least four hours per week and the FE students wanted two sessions per week with the women students expressing a preference for morning sessions. This choice invariably related to domestic commitments, for both the men and women, which allowed some 'free' time when children were at school.

Suggestions for improvements to the courses tended to relate to general issues rather than content although requests for more computing activity and more appropriate resources were made. The following list summarises the improvements that the students felt should be considered.

For the FE college courses:

- providing better childcare facilities
- advertising the courses in a more accessible form. For example, ABE courses were sometimes advertised alongside other courses provided by colleges and consequently, were 'not easy to see in a long list of courses'. Door-to-door leafleting and radio and TV advertising were seen as the most effective means of publicity; the latter perhaps more so as they used oral communication rather than requiring the reading of promotional literature
- providing more places for classes in the community
- using computers in the learning where appropriate
- using college minibuses for transporting students to classes to reduce student expenditure on travel
- reviewing the learning materials used on courses to ensure that they related to the students' interests
- allocating more time for classes
- providing more tutors to reduce student:tutor ratios.

For the RTO courses:

- extending the length of the courses since three months was seen by some as being too short
- introducing measures to encourage continued participation and decrease drop-out rates.

For the WEA course:

- advertising the women's course more widely.

Benefits of participating

The perceived benefits of participation in ABE were quite wide ranging. Even on the specifically vocational RTO courses students spoke of using their new skills to read books for personal pleasure. This illustrates the twin benefits of basic skills courses in that what is learned can be used both for personal pleasure and development and for vocational purposes. In addition, the student will often gain in self-confidence and many students from across the three types of course actually did report an increase in their self confidence due to participating in their courses. In the case of the WEA course in particular, obtaining skills which would help progression on to other more advanced education was seen as a major benefit.

Some clear illustrations were given of how such skills can improve the abilities of people as well as their quality of life. For example, one man who was in a showband previously had had to memorise lyrics to songs but now that he was able to read better, he could learn them from song-sheets. The following quotes from some of the interviewees highlight the impact their courses had on them:

> *Coming to the class has given me so many other interests...I've been coming here a year and I couldn't have told one plant from another, but now I have my garden organised because I can read when before I couldn't read the names.*
>
> FE student

> *It encourages you to read around other subjects when before I hadn't done any reading*
>
> RTO trainee

> *It will give me a better way of life...I have more confidence in myself. When I go on holiday I'll be able to read the menus, where the tourist information is etc. I'll not be so depressed about not being able to do things.*
>
> FE student

Future aspirations

In almost every case the students said they wished to continue with their learning either through the same course in the next session or on similar courses. Many of the FE college students had been on their course since September (until May) and the determination so demonstrated would give credence to their wish to follow up their studies. Some FE students had high aspirations in, for example, going on eventually to do a social science degree. Vocational as well as personal goals were expressed by FE students who saw the acquisition of basic literacy and numeracy skills as enabling them to get into better jobs or to progress within their workplace. Indeed, some had already found promotion as a result of their participation.

In contrast the RTO trainees were less convincing in their expressed wishes to follow up their studies, particularly as it appeared they could not repeat the present course with its payment and guaranteed work placement. It could be that they were less motivated than other types of learners because they are not volunteers in the sense that an adult doing an FE based course, and who pays fees, is. However, at one centre some mentioned using the skills they had acquired as a 'spring board' to go onto other vocational courses (NVQs and City and Guilds). The RTO students were more likely to use the skills in seeking a job - the main rationale for their courses, and their participation had given them a better idea of what type of work they wanted to do.

5 Conclusions

The students interviewed had a variety of reasons for their participation, often both vocational and personal in orientation. This indicates that the distinction often made by policy makers and others, in relating participation in courses to either vocational or personal/leisure motivation is tenuous. Some students highlighted that participation and success in broad-based basic skills courses had encouraged them to progress on to more demanding courses which were often more vocational in orientation. Not surprisingly, adults doing the RTO courses were the most vocationally oriented. However, in areas where unemployment was especially high, the students were sceptical about the usefulness of expressly vocational courses.

The initial stimulus to participate in ABE was often 'triggered' when some event or realisation in the person's life brought into focus their lack of basic skills and the need to acquire better literacy or numeracy skills. This could be some change in their workplace, perhaps demanding new duties which included higher levels of literacy or numeracy, or in the domestic context, with perhaps their children bringing home work to them and asking for help. In most cases the accompanying feeling of inadequacy and discomfort prompted the need to seek appropriate ABE provision. The rôle of supportive friends and family was clear as they would often find out what courses were available and then encourage partners or family members with ABE needs to participate. Perhaps those advertising ABE could consider how best to reach, not just the adults themselves, but also their friends and family.

Barriers which had discouraged adults from getting on their current course or had put them off previous courses were mainly dispositional including the fear of being seen to have ABE needs, of travelling to unsafe areas, and of not being able to cope with course content. Situational barriers included the costs incurred by participation – mainly travel but also fees. Childcare considerations were also reported as affecting the students' participation and the extent to which they could attend regularly.

The students gave particular praise to the content of their courses, styles of teaching and particularly the qualities of their teachers. Initial assessment of individual students' needs was common practice and thorough in nature. However, systematic action plans providing guidance to students on how to progress after completing their course were almost non existent. In contrast to initial assessment and induction guidance, pre-entry guidance was minimal across providers with variable information and advice being given when the students contacted providers. Guidance and support while on courses was considered by the participants to be excellent.

Resources and accommodation available to the classes were of high quality in the RTO sites and were more variable in the FE college courses. The majority of co-ordinators and managers of ABE provision felt that overall there was insufficient funding available for ABE in Northern Ireland. Providers see improvements in materials, accommodation, staff development, and in the number of staff as priorities if further funding were available.

Given the reportedly low uptake of courses by women with young children, better crèche facilities would also be important.

The numbers of full time staff varied and providers would have liked a ratio of one tutor to five adult learners. However in practice the range was most likely to be one tutor for between six and thirteen adult learners. Lower ratios were used if possible with adults with special needs. Some interesting information emerged in relation to staff qualifications. Full-time staff are the best qualified but most ABE teaching is done by part-time and volunteer tutors whose level of relevant qualifications is lower than that of full-time staff.

Finally, the value of ABE courses for adults was made clear by the accounts of the informants. The benefits included: helping improve skills needed at work and increasing promotion prospects, improving the quality of life by, for example, facilitating reading for pleasure. By far the greatest benefit seemed to be an increase in self-esteem.

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Appendix 1

Details of sample and method

Phase 2

Phase 2 sampling

The sample for this phase was intended to reflect the public, private and voluntary sectors. The sample therefore, included:

- all 23 FE colleges;
- 19 recognised training organisations (12 JTP, 5 Training Link and 1 providing both JTP and Training Link) and found to be providing ABE;
- the 3 of the 4 WEA divisions found to be providing ABE and shown by Phase 1 as being the main voluntary providers of ABE in Northern Ireland.

We wanted to interview, where possible, at least two members of staff from providers, someone with management responsibilities for literacy and numeracy provision and a tutor. The total sample was to be about 100 people. The intended and achieved sample are summarised below.

Provider	Intended number	Achieved number	Response rate
Further Education Colleges	all 23 co-ordinators	22 co-ordinators	96%
	1 tutor from all 23 colleges	13 tutors	57%
	Intended Total 46	**Achieved Total 35**	**76%**
Recognised training organisations	all foundation managers	13 managers	68%
	1 trainer/tutor from all 19 agencies which actually provided 'ABE'	10 trainer/tutors	53%
	Intended Total 38	**Achieved Total 23**	**61%**
WEA	appropriate ABE co-ordinator	2 ABE co-ordinators	100%
	1 tutor from each of the 3 WEA areas which actually provided 'ABE'	1 tutor	33%
	Intended Total 6	**Achieved Total 1**	**50%**
YMCA	Main office 1 representative	**Achieved Total 1**	**100%**
	Overall projected effective total 90	**Overall achieved total 62**	**69%**

In attempting to attain the intended sample we had hoped to include one tutor/trainer for each provider to assess whether there were any differences between the management perspective and that of the tutors. While it was relatively straight forward to identify and contact the co-ordinators and managers for each provider because we had their names and telephone numbers, it proved very difficult to reach the tutors and trainers in each provider because many were part-time. We relied on the co-ordinators to identify tutors/trainers and to facilitate our contact with them by passing on our request to a tutor (selected at random and could be full, part-time or voluntary). Despite numerous follow-up attempts (at least eight separate 'waves' of call backs and enquiries by the researchers and their interview team to reach tutors/trainers we did not contact and interview as many as we had hoped. This appears to be due to tutors being mobile or not around when we telephoned and messages to call back not getting through to the tutors. This was probably exacerbated by the fact that many tutors would have been part-time and voluntary.

Phase 2 methods

All of the interviews were conducted over the telephone using structured interview schedules. SCRE has extensive experience of telephone surveys having managed large scale surveys of mature students, employers, and teaching staff. The quality of data as good as that obtained by other methods. This method was seen as the most appropriate and effective because we had to cover a range of providers within our limited finances. Also, busy teaching staff, often prefer to be interviewed over the telephone at a pre-arranged time as this is less intrusive and time consuming than face-to-face interviews.

The average length of interview was 35 minutes but some did last as long as one hour. The questions derived from the research questions set down at the beginning of the project to address the aims of the project, these were informed by the qualitative interviews which comprised Phase 1 of the project.

Phase 3

Phase 3 sampling

Learners were contacted through a sub-sample of providers from Phase 2, we selected five FE colleges, three Recognised Training Organisations and one WEA provider (the proportions were based on the prevalence of the providers in Northern Ireland and the amount of ABE the sectors provide). The providers were selected to include those catering for small, medium and large numbers of students across different areas of Northern Ireland. The following table shows the numbers of interviewees by sector.

Numbers of interviewees by sector

Provider	Numbers interviewed
FE 1	5
FE 2	1
FE 3	8
FE 4 (N=7)	7
FE 5 (N=6]	6(inc 3 special needs)
Sector totals	27
RTO 1	8
RTO 2	7
RTO 3 (N=8)	8
Sector totals	23
WEA (N=5)	5 (all women)
Sector totals	5
Totals	55

The interview contexts fell into three categories:

- FE college courses which offered ABE especially for students with severe learning difficulties and who pay a maximum of five pounds to join the course. These course were provided on a one class (daytime/evening/night) a week basis;
- Recognised Training Organisations offering Training and Employment Agency basic skills training for which the students get paid and which mainly offer preparation for mainstream Employment Training and a work placement. These courses were provided on a 15 or 30 hours a week full-time basis;
- WEA Return to Learn course was a women's course basic English course (although provision for GCSE was included) based at a community house on an estate. Students had to pay £1.00 per session and a crèche was included.

Phase 3 methods

The providers arranged for adults doing basic education classes to be available at an appropriate time for all involved. The providers were clear that we wanted to speak to a class of adults with basic education needs and chose a class on this basis. The numbers of adults we spoke to across the nine sites were very limited as we had to rely on those who turned up at their class on the arranged day and time. However, the strength of the information gathered is in the depth and candidness of learners' replies.

The students were interviewed in groups based usually on their normal class using a semi-structured discussion schedule. For the most part this approach encouraged them to be expressive and candid. Indeed they also spoke very freely about their difficulties with literacy and numeracy.

The questioning followed the guidelines given in the schedule and covered issues relating to:

- learners' reasons for being on the course;
- the barriers/ difficulties, if any, that they overcame to get on their course;
- their views on their course (information, courses content, teaching methods, problems experienced while on the course and possible improvements);
- their aspirations upon finishing the course.

Appendix 2

Advisory Committee

Maureen Bennett	Education and Training Inspectorate, Department of Education, Northern Ireland
Dorothy Eagleson	President, National Association for Educational Guidance for Adults
Jim McCormick	Principal, Castlereagh College of Further Education (Association of College Principals)
Paul Nolan	District Secretary – WEA, Belfast
Frances Open	Programme Development Branch, Training and Employment Agency
John Park	Social Services Inspector, Department of Health and Social Services
Brian Rouse	FE Adviser, Southern Education and Library Board, nominated by Association of Chief Executives
Hilary A Sloan	Chair, Deputy Adult Literacy and Basic Education Committee
Eleanor Speers	Deputy Director, Educational Guidance Service for Adults
Wesley Starr	Director, Institute of Continuing Education, The Queen's University of Belfast

Research team

John Gardner	Director, School of Education, The Queen's University of Belfast
Kevin Lowden	Research Officer, Scottish Council for Research in Education
Robin D A Mark	Lecturer, Institute of Continuing Education, The Queen's University of Belfast
Janet Powney	Senior Researcher, Scottish Council for Research in Education
Joan Ballantine	Programme Secretary

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